

Q: Good afternoon. Today is August 3rd and my name is Clara Silverstein with Historic Newton. I'm here at City Hall with Philip Herr. Together we're participating in the Newton Talks Oral History Project that is being conducted with the Newton Free Library, Historic Newton, and the Newton Senior Center. So now I would like to ask you a few questions about your military service. What is your connection to Newton? This one doesn't have to do with military service, but it's just establishing who you are for the record.

A: My family moved from Belmont to Newton, I don't know, 60 years ago, because we thought this was a good place for our family. Easy as that. It was easy to, I worked in Cambridge and Boston and it was easy to get to both from here.

Q: What were you doing before you entered the service?

A: I'm sorry?

Q: What were you doing before you entered the service?

A: I was going to college. I got, I had gotten notice for being drafted the week after I got out of school. It was immediate. They also suggested to me some things that I might do that might get them to not have to go in, but I chose not to do that.

Q: What did you miss most about home, aside from family and friends, when you were serving?

A: I'm sorry?

Q: What did you miss most about home when you were serving, aside from family and friends?

A: I provided you with answers to things, and I don't remember that as well as the questions that I thought they were going to answer.

Q: We can move on to the next question, that's fine.

A: What I answered when I did it in writing was very little.

Q: Okay.

A: I wasn't-- It was an interruption in my career, but I just, I just thought that was inevitable, so I just took it.

Q: Why did you join the particular branch of the military that you joined?

A: Because I got drafted.

Q: Okay, so they said, "We want you to join a particular branch"?

A: They said that I would be in the Army. I went into Basic Training in the Army. After some couple of months of that they came to ask each of us what we were going to do next within the Army, and they suggested that I might go to Fort Belvoir in Virginia for the engineering and that I could be trained to do drafting, and I had told them I didn't think that made a lot of sense, because I had just had five years of study as an architect and I did drafting very well, thank you very much. And they said, "Well, you have another option and that is to be in the infantry." I said, "I would love to go to Fort Belvoir." And that's what it was.

Q: How did you adapt to military life? That could include the physical regimen, the barracks, the food, the social life.

A: I didn't have any difficulty with any of that. I found it all pretty easy. I thought about it a little bit since doing this, and I think maybe part of that is that when I was a little kid many summers I spent a couple of weeks in YMCA camps, and this was kind of like going to a YMCA camp, so it wasn't a sudden different thing of being in strange quarters and with all these other people and not with your family, so it was not troubling for me at all.

Q: How did you stay in touch with family and friends back home?

A: We exchanged letters, but it wasn't, it wasn't very frequent. Most of the time I was overseas, so I wasn't able to come back and visit with them, but we did exchange letters.

Q: So you started Fort Belvoir, but then where did you serve?

A: I served at Camp Zama in Japan, which is outside Tokyo, and was there for the whole of my service.

Q: Do you remember arriving there and what it was like when you arrived?

A: I very much remember it. It was when the-- We came in by troop ship and when we left we knew we were crossing the Pacific, we didn't know where we were going, and when we got close they told us we were going to go to Yokohama, which is good because there was no combat there, and I just, I vividly remember the train trip from the port where we landed to the camp where we stayed and the things that I saw out the window were just amazing to me, because here are these Japanese people dressed the way they were, which was significantly different, particularly for the women, than ours, and it was exciting.

Q: Tell me about a few of your most memorable experiences both positive and negative.

A: What I suggested on this writing is, I looked at it again this morning, I think it is correct, when I was drafted the first week or so you're just, you're getting clothing and you're doing mechanical things, and one of the things that we did was to go to a place on camp that had beer and we could go drink beer, and there I met some more people who, just like me, who had just been drafted, were brand new in the Army, and they were not going to stay in the Army, because they had things about them that disqualified them. They were-- They were not 4F, but they were something. They were, I think, many of them perhaps had mental disabilities or some other kind of disabilities. And meeting those people and seeing how easy they were, and they made light of it, was an enormous impact on me. It just, it took-- I got a 4F, which is the failed physical, when I first took it, but they say, "But the one thing that we need to do a better test on," and they did a better test on it and then they found out, "Oh you're actually okay." I didn't go through that, but that process, and they didn't just immediately send them away. What was happening was that the Army was addressing some of the problems that they had, fixing teeth or other things, but they weren't going to keep them. That just was very powerful.

The arrival in Yokohama was very powerful. There is the third one that I put down here. My work was, in the Army was office work. Somehow at some point I got called out and told that I was going to be the person to guard a person who had been, an American who had been arrested by the Army and they were moving him from the camp where I was to another place. And I was to sit in the back of the truck with my arm, with my rifle and see to it that he didn't try to get out of the truck. And in two years in the Army that was the whole of the experience I had where there was any possibility that I was going to use a weapon against another person. I found it, that is still in my head, I still don't know what I would have done if he tried to-- I think he was-- I was miserable. I think he was more miserable than I was. And that was a very, very powerful experience.

Q: Thank you. Do you recall the day your service ended?

A: I'm sorry?

Q: Do you recall the day that your service ended?

A: Yes. When I got drafted first you get thrown into a barrack, and it was still, "This is it. You're going to sleep here. And another guy, you're going to sleep here." And that other guy turned out to be, like me, a person who had just graduated with the schooling in architecture, and we stayed together all the way through the Basic Training, and he was given the same opportunity to go to Fort Belvoir to learn drafting that I did and we both went to Fort Belvoir, and we both got flown over to Takoma to go to the Far East and we both wound up in Yokohama and we both wound up in the same unit which was in the metro intelligence unit. And there we finally parted that he went to Korea and I stayed in Japan.

But about a year later he came back from Korea to Japan to where I was, and when our time was up, we both had come in at the same time, we both finished at the same time, and we traveled in the same ship, and I vividly remember as we approached San Francisco, we were wondering how long was it going to be and I was thinking, "I think we're going to get there at such and such an hour", and I remember that we went under the Golden Gate at exactly that time with that guy. And I'm still in touch with him here. It's remarkable. That was coming back. We both came back to the same place, got the same treatment. He went to Connecticut. I came up to Massachusetts.

Q: What was it like to return to civilian life?

A: Well, it meant that I had to start to think about what am I going to do with my life. If you're in the Army you don't have to think about that. You do what they tell you to do. But I thought it was a good opportunity for me to start as an architect, but I had the GI Bill which enabled me to do graduate studies, and I didn't think well of what you learn in graduate architectural things, it's

just not, in my view, particularly useful, so I used it to study city planning instead of architecture and did it at MIT, and that turned out to be a very good choice. I did go back into architecture, but then I came out of it after a time, and that's the rest of a very fine career that I owe in a sense to having been in the service.

Q: You actually talked about how your service influenced the rest of your life. How did it influence your outlook on war or on the military in general?

A: That wasn't, I don't remember that as one of those questions. I don't feel that it made any very big changes for me. I was very grateful that my military time didn't put me into doing something that involved high risks or attacking anybody else. I was in an office doing office work, and it was important office work, it was very, very fruitful so that all of that was, I think, quite positive. My time in Japan was very positive. The ability to travel was wonderful.

Q: So, it looks like our time is just about up, and I'm just going to have you think about what you might like people to know a hundred years from now about your time in the service, any parting thoughts.

A: Well, first of all, I think very powerful for me was being in a foreign country with a very different culture than ours, and I learned a great deal from that and I guess I very much have stuck with that. I think the-- I don't know.

Q: Well, just if you were going to leave behind an impression of your service or what you might want people to read about in a book a hundred years from now is there something that you might extrapolate there?

A: Well, I think that the things that struck me were such as how widely different the Japanese culture was from the American culture, which being in the Army gave me an opportunity to

experience for some time, but that these people weren't really different from we and that when you got to know them they were people just like we were, but there were cultural differences that were very large, very powerful, and it was important to be able to in a sense exchange cultures in a way that I think would be wonderful for more people. I have since that time been able to, I have traveled much of the world on business and, most of it is business, but never again able to be in a foreign land and experiencing those differences and the nondifferences which I think is very wonderful.

Q: Well thank you so much for taking time to do this with us. We're happy to be able to include you in the Newton Talks Oral History Project, so thanks.

A: Thank you.

[Audio break]

A: -- A secretary who was Japanese. It's interesting. She was in the entry part and then we were in another part. She couldn't come into our part, because that was very sensitive, but we knew each other, and so there was, there was that connection. There were, we had a Japanese man who took care of the barrack that I stayed in and I got to know him. The camp was just outside of a small town and the small town was, as is true all over the world, small towns outside big military places tend to have some bars, and I used those bars and met people and came to know some people and got to know some families. Some of the people in my office had married Japanese women and I did things socially with them.

There was, Camp Zama is said to be the West Point of Japan. I'm not sure, it's not as big, but it's, you know, and it's high on a hill and then there is a valley and you can see way over in the distance is another region of mountains, and one in particular that I could see. And I took advantage of, we had all kinds of maps, and I was able to figure out what that was and one day

persuaded a couple of my friends to come with me and we would go up there and maybe go up that mountain. And we did, and it turned out that it was a sacred mountain, and if you climbed up, as you went up there were all kinds of memorials and things, and then about halfway up there was a temple and many people along the way. And then if you continued to go further and further up at the very tip there was just a very little thing. But it was a remarkable experience, and we met many people, not just that day, I went there probably 10 times, because it was such a wonderful place. And you met people. I can't speak much Japanese now, but I was reasonably capable then and met people through that, which was great.

Q: It sounds amazing. What was the name of the mountain?

A: I never did get the name. I saw it, but it didn't stick in my head. It's not Fuji. Mt. Fuji was further away. You couldn't see it from where we were.

Q: That sounds lovely.

END OF INTERVIEW